

# the necessity of irrelevant traditions

BY SAMUEL HUX

Thinking of Allen Tate, as I had been doing since his *Collected Poems* received the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize, and now since his death, reminds me of something else as well, the Agrarian philosophy he, along with John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, and others, espoused in the 1930s. I don't think Agrarianism as a movement rates a laudation, but it does deserve these many unsatisfactory years later a reconsideration of its basic principles, which were, I think, quite different from what they were considered to be. They were not quaint aesthetic yearnings irrelevant to the brute economic facts of American society. They were profoundly attuned to those facts; much more so, I find, than all the sociology since, speaking much more directly to my own and others' particular anguish.

"Anguish" suggests loss; and if mine and others' cannot be located specifically where Tate chose to locate his in his neo-Confederate days, we can appreciate nonetheless the sense that something is absent. Writing of John Peale Bishop in his *Memoirs and Opinions 1926-1974*, Tate referred to himself as one of those "who survive him into a world that he could not have liked"—and you know that Tate could not either. What's of value in the present is what has lasted from the past, and even that slips away

beneath one. Tate concludes his Parisian memoirs with an only slightly ironic melancholy: "These trivia have survived a world that is dead for the entertainment of a world that is dying. *Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt.*" These sentiments are not merely the possession—and the right, one might add—of a seventy-odd-year-old memoirist: at the ripe young age of forty-three Tate began a poem, "The day's at end and there's no place to go, / Draw to the fire, even this fire is dying."

Stylish melancholy? —No. For it's true: "even this fire is dying"; and there is a way in which Tate's career as essayist and polemicist, and especially as Agrarian, was an attempt to deny that fact that he knew to be true. But let me be clear and emphatic about this.

I do *not* mean that Tate saw that the Old Southern ways were doomed and that his Agrarianism was an effort to deny it, and that Tate was thereby something of a quixotic fool. I mean that—Old South and all that nonsense aside—Tate saw that traditions of culture, morals, and manners, "discipline like fate / Without memory, too ancient to be learned," could not be sustained by our economy, feared that the probability of a moral union of private and public life was doomed in our society, that he did not wish to accept that truth—and that, far from quixotic fool, he was perfectly right, fears justified: *it is doomed.*

One of the more significant "opinions" in *Memoirs and Opinions* predates Tate's active career as Agrarian, and goes a long way to explaining the impulses behind that career. In "Humanism and Naturalism" (which appeared first in 1929 as "The Fallacy of Humanism"), Tate found the "Neo-Humanists" Irving Babbitt, Norman Foerster, and Paul Elmer More too eclectic in their traditionalism, grounding their faith in a "tradition" that had existed in no *place*, except in a kind of rootless mental anthology, and that had not *evolved* as a kind of common wisdom but had been *created* by a synthesizing intellect, pragmatically, to work. Neo-Humanist "tradition" was a source of authority that "takes all the *time* out of the past and all the concreteness out of the present," a "tradition" in which, for instance, "there is no conception of religion [or any other system of values] as preserved, organized experience; you have a mechanism of moral ideas." This is entirely too abstract, Tate argued; one cannot just formulate a cultural system of values; it must grow through *located* experi-

ence. "The American humanists have tried to make the resultant situation its own background."

Tate remarks in preface that he now sees his attack upon the Neo-Humanists as an attack upon himself at the time—"but it was easier to project it onto others." The next year he would contribute to the collective manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* and his fame as *Southern* Agrarian would be established; but in the mid to late 1920s, even while writing constantly on Southern themes, including his biographies of Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis, Tate was one of the most caustic critics of Southern tradition. But from 1930 on, Tate, the *Southerner*, gave tradition a "local habitation and a name." And it is worth supposing that his new-found admiration for the Old South (that time-and-region he had earlier characterized as "a sentiment susceptible of no precise definition," and which had been so devoid of culture that the "modern Southerner does not inherit, nor is he likely to have, a native culture compounded of the strength and subtlety of his New England contemporaries") was less that than the grounding and placing of tradition *somewhere* (!) . . . and why not at home?

But the identification of Agrarianism and its basic principles with the defense of the "unreconstructed" South is misleading—and is a principal reason they are obscured from us today. There were minor applications, exaggerated beyond all sense in the heat of the thirties; but in essence those principles are a defense of what has been best in Western civilization, at best very rare and doubtfully existent today. When one sees them pure, one sees how little they had to do with the South specifically save the fact, ironically less significant than it appears, that the South *was* largely agricultural.

Agrarianism was an anti-capitalist alternative (a theoretical one at any rate) and, unlike the fascism leftist critics occasionally and unjustly associated it with, *seriously* anti-capitalist: a mere reform of finance and industrial capitalism accompanied by rhetorical campaigns against Red and Reactionary alike would not have been to its liking. Its natural ally was the English Distributist movement following G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, championed in America by Herbert Agar, who edited with Tate in 1930 *Who Owns America?*—which suggests that Agrarianism had as much to say of shop and town as of farm and country. As much as?—that wasn't a great deal actually. Of the literary Agrarians

Ransom wrote a couple of essays on the economic theory of subsistence farming, but Tate had the good sense to keep the theory broad in its application. He had no more intention of raising "the great bulk of the foods for the family," no more inclination "to can, preserve, and cure for the winter, . . . to work mainly with literal horse-power, mule-power, man-power; to feed all the animals, as well as the persons, from the land" as a way of avoiding the need for money than did Ransom, who penned those words above. What was important was that whether in shop, or on farm, or elsewhere *one be what he does, one do what he is*, and that that was impossible in an industrialized, capitalistic society. The Agrarian life, as he and his colleagues mythologized it, seemed to Tate perfect manifestation of the desired equivalence of the infinitives/imperatives *do* and *be*.

The alienation of worker from possession and control of means of production, ends of product, has long been a leftist commonplace, with "alienation" to describe not only an occupational fact but a psychological result. But the idea that workers might "own" a socialized industry could not impress the Agrarians because industrial society itself was unnatural and alienating, whoever owned the means. A man could not feel at one with "a mere turnover . . . a pile of money, a volume of produce, a market, or a credit system," as Ransom put it, the way he could with a "spot of ground" and "a native province." The former series has nothing to do with *property*, in spite of the capitalists' free use of the word, because property "means moral control of the means of life," as Tate put it, and "is the medium in which tradition is passed on." Industrialism is antithetical to tradition itself and to traditional values themselves, not just to specific instances; it depends upon constant advance and dissatisfaction with the snail's pace of life; it may be originated by men, but its growth and movement become its *raison d'être*, its movements restrained only by availability of resources, markets, technological capacity—not by traditional, inherited values.

I don't really think the Agrarians exaggerated; and I rather agree with a friend of "democratic capitalism," Michael Novak, that "no system is in fact more radical. Pell-mell it overturns the habits, traditions, and cultures of the past. Under its tutelage and leadership world process has been accelerated as never before. Conservative? Inertial? Which capitalist of your acquaintance

lives in a world like that of a generation ago? Democratic capitalism undermines all traditions and institutions (even itself)" and is a kind of provincialism, as Tate once defined that word in contradistinction to regionalism: "regionalism is that consciousness or habit of men in a given locality which influences them to certain patterns of thought and conduct handed to them by their ancestors. Regionalism is thus limited in space but not in time," while the "provincial attitude is limited in time but not in space"; the provincial begins "every day as if there had been no yesterday"—unless "yesterday" is defined, of course, by what resources, markets, and technical capacities there were then. I doubt the easy association of regional, agrarian, and traditional. I agree, however, that industrial society cannot be "traditional," cannot even have its *own* tradition—not as Tate defines tradition, and justly defines it, I might add.

A society is not traditional by virtue of age or by living on or in a past, Tate answered in his 1936 essay "What Is a Traditional Society?" A newly created society would be "traditional" if it could pass on to the next generation an "imperative of reference" that there be no disjunction between the economy and one's moral nature: "The material basis of life, in such a society, is not hostile to the perpetuation of a moral code, as our finance-capitalist economics unquestionably is. It is an old story by this time that our modern economic system can be operated efficiently regardless of the moral stature of the men who operate it." One could counter that so could an agrarian society. But Tate was not saying simply that ethics should not be divorced from business; were he, one could simply congratulate him on his naiveté and look for profundity elsewhere. He was saying something a great deal more radical, appealing to a principle that certainly now can be *only* an imperative of reference: ". . . that the way of life and the livelihood of men must be the same; . . . that our way of getting a living is not good enough for us if we are driven by it to pretend that it is something else; that we cannot pretend to be landed gentlemen two days of the week if we are middle-class capitalists the five others." Or cabinet makers if we work a jack-hammer during the week. Or sculptors if we dress mannequins for cash Monday through Friday. Tate doesn't suggest the latter metaphors; but I want to extend his principle, in a direction I'm sure he'd approve.

*One's way of life and livelihood should be the same.* What was so appealing about the subsistence agrarian was that his exis-

tence, in theory at any rate, seemed the perfect manifestation of this principle. The classical concept of alienation does not apply. He lived *on* the farm, and he *was* a farmer; he gained a livelihood by the care of and respect for his most immediate surroundings. They were part of himself: he'd mixed his labor with them. But very few (any?) of us are "agrarians" now—perhaps the priest in his rectory, perhaps the professional soldier in his barracks. But the "perhaps" is a very liberal gesture: chances are the soldier lives off base and is seen in uniform only on it; and priests more and more shed collars when off duty. But I do not mean merely a proximity of where one lives to where one works, nor merely a matter of vestimentary styles; I try only to make a principle visual.

Most of us do not feel that what we *do* is an expression of what we *are*, or the other way around. We do a certain job, if we're lucky one that's not too unpleasant, in order to have the cash to buy the time to *be* what we think we are. (Perhaps we are deluded in our estimations of our real identities, but even in that case there's a disjunction between our ways of livelihood and our significant illusions.) In a popular film—I forget which one—sophisticated young lady takes earthy young man to a party and introduces him to friends. Jack here is a composer; he works in the city zoo. Jill's a poet; she's a secretary at Consolidated Trust. Have you noticed—young man asks later—how all your friends are all something else? The audience laughs, recognizing arty pretension. I know I did. But then how many times have I answered, "Me? Well, I teach in a university . . . it's hard to make a living writing essays"? But of course it's not only a matter of us recognizably pretentious ones. Another member of the audience makes briefs for a legal firm but "knows" he's really a gardener, longs all week to get back to the shrubs. This is more than a classic question of leisure: a fundamental discrepancy between life and livelihood.

Of course one could advise the attorney to just give it up and become a gardener, for Christ's sake; he doesn't have the problem of the poet, since gardening *is* a job you can get paid for. But this would miss the point, for it's not one person's problem I'm talking about, but a fundamental fact of our existence now. We all work for institutions of one kind or another—school, legal firm, tool-die factory, Butternut Farms—and we are not at ease. Something profound in our desires for integrity and simplification is disturbed. That is not *we*, we feel. I don't expect that in subsequent generations people will be named William Unitedconglomerates,

as people were named Smith because they worked metal.

Well, the family farm will go the way of the cottage industry, and men named Taylor will work as salesmen for brassiere manufacturers. I do not complain, really. I suspect the human being is so perverse that were it possible for the “agrarian” ideal to obtain, psychoanalysts would still have work: “Doctor, I feel there’s no difference between me and my work; there’s so much sameness in my life.” But Tate’s “imperative of reference” that there be a moral unity between personal identity and economics *was* our tradition for centuries, no matter how often we rebelled against it (which is what you do with tradition), ultimately rebelled successfully. Our ideal has in that sense been Platonic—maybe one reason *The Republic* has always held its special place for us despite its inchoate Spartan totalitarianism. It seemed “justice” that one *do* what he *is*: a command of the soul that is just as compelling as the fear that some commander would decide what you are and therefore what you must do was repulsive. That traditional ideal is now dying if not dead, and we have no similar ideal that unites identity and economics; indeed, it is now common to think of what we do as “just a job.”

In Tate’s terms, then, we have no “traditional society.” We do of course have the remnants of a Judaeo-Christian tradition that tells us, in an economic application, to do unto others as we would be done unto in business dealings. But, as I’ve suggested earlier, that’s a different matter: how to do, not what to do. With no disrespect intended: that tradition is in a way irrelevant to our industrial society since our economy *can* operate perfectly well irrespective of the moral stature of the operators. I don’t think anyone short of an evangelist for the Protestant-capitalist ethic would seriously argue that the more one puts his religious faith to practice the better and more profitably he runs Detroit, or that Pittsburgh is the religion of the Testaments given a sociological habitation and an economic name. The Judaeo-Christian tradition runs parallel to industrial society, may even be claimed on high patriotic days as its ideology, but there is no necessary penetration. Its faithful may criticize or congratulate specific industrial practices, but they are carping at or applauding an alien who needn’t even listen. In a sense the Judaeo-Christian “tradition” has ceased to be a tradition in an important respect: in his contribution to *I’ll Take My Stand*, Tate observed, “. . . Merely living in

a certain stream of civilized influence does not compel us to be loyal to it. Indeed, the act of loyalty, or the fact of loyalty, must be spontaneous to count at all; tradition must, in other words, be automatically operative before it can be called tradition." Who would argue that industrial society, *qua* such, is spontaneously loyal to Judaeo-Christian precepts, that those precepts are automatically operative in the economic realm? What are automatically operative for industrial society are its own compulsions—expansion toward markets, social services consonant with profits, stimulation of needs real or created, dissatisfaction with the current mousetrap, and such. In one sense, then, industrial progress, the uprooter of traditions, is itself "traditional"—but I think that merely a facile indulgence of paradox.

The Middle Eastern religions came to be and grew in a quite different world of trade, in which you bartered directly with another human, and of agriculture, in which you dealt directly and manually with God's plenty or dearth. I'm not suggesting some economic-determinist explanation of origins; I'm simply saying that the Judaeo-Christian ethos "made sense" in the most mundane and quotidian way. And when one traded or cultivated, he was, ideally, doing a kind of religious labor, since work done well and with the soul's commitment was a celebration of the Lord—which implied that one *did* what was consonant with what one *was*. But now, no matter how many independent exceptions and no matter what success of some individual creative eccentric, the basic assumption of industrial society is that one "have a job." I do not suggest that we should jettison what's left of the Judaeo-Christian tradition (far from it) as an archaism, or that we should realistically forget the imperative that way-of-livelihood express way-of-life. I simply note, not with pleasure, that alienation is the price we pay for life now.

I take it that one cannot live—I know that I cannot imagine living—without some intellectual, cultural, moral tradition. And I agree with Tate that a "tradition" that does not grow from rooted experience, that is eclectically concocted, as he argued that Neo-Humanism was, lacks a certain authority: it is merely grafted on to the social body with an independent blood system; it is not "automatically operative." And when we say "rooted experience" we cannot be so precious as to think that applies only to the private affections, our cells of silent contemplation, library and con-



cert hall, bed and board; without work we are fed and housed poorly, art and thought are luxuries, and affections are cramped. Our experience then is in a very basic way economic—which raises a question of how traditions are to be sustained:

The higher myth of religion, the lower myth of history [a society's imaginative vision of itself, as the early Republic liked to think of itself as "Roman"], even ordinary codes of conduct, cannot preserve themselves; indeed they do not exist apart from our experience. *Since the most significant feature of our experience is the way we make our living, the economic basis of life is the soil out of which all the forms, good or bad, of our experience must come* (italics added).

But industrial society is poor soil. Its cultural products reflect its ethos: here today, obsolete tomorrow. The spastic fashionableness of pop art; quickie therapy, weekend stuff; sexual swinging called a liberating phenomenon, so that the constitutionally unfaithful are taken with the seriousness of moral philosophers on late-night TV talk-shows; and too many etceteras. If one should call such production "the cultural tradition of industrial society," then words lose meaning. *Tradition* has to imply something both stabilizing and compelling. I don't know how such freneticism could be considered culturally stable, although it certainly expresses a kind of directionless compulsiveness.

In other words, where *is* the soil for "the higher myth of religion, the lower myth of history, even ordinary codes of conduct"? I think the answer is that the soil *isn't*, and hence a horrible contradiction: we cannot *grow* what we need.

We have to take the fruits of a past soil and graft them on (they are amazingly imperishable). This may be no more than something like what the Neo-Humanists attempted, the cosmopolitan eclecticism Tate attacked because he knew it so well ("it was easier to project it onto others"). This may be a kind of artificial respiration. But on the other hand, if we acquiesce to an intellectual, cultural, moral "tradition" that is absolutely congruent with the particular economic bases of our lives, we will definitively become the skittery, superficial society we threaten to become. If rejecting such a congruence means that our traditions have to pull one way, and the economic facts of our lives another, that we live in a modern, progressively industrial environment while holding to traditional cultural biases that are, by sheer fact of contrast, more ancient than ever, so be it—or, so it has to be. If this means we have to be hyper-self-conscious of traditions instead of responding

spontaneously to the “automatically operative,” then it does. If it means that “cultivation” is a euphemism for another “alienation,” I have to learn to accept the irony.

And it *does* mean we ought to try a moratorium on complaints that the life of the mind and loyalty to ancient values tend to make for an inadequately grateful “adversary culture.” Of course they do, with or without those two modifiers. Perhaps it’s impossible not to lament that fact, but we could avoid cheap shots—those various contemporary echoes of the facile ridicule Tate received when an Agrarian, that it’s precisely industrial society that makes a critic like Tate possible and gives him a hearing. That’s a mechanical view of complexities. Industrial society sold him a typewriter. Democracy gave him a hearing. In an equally famous industrial society he’d not have been heard.

Novak, who sees (as I don’t) advanced capitalism and political liberty as symbiotically related (his quarrel is not with Tate but with democratic socialists), and who, as remarked earlier, sees our system as undermining of all cultural traditions, still notes the paradox that “it alone of all the world’s known systems generates an entire industry of well-rewarded critics.” Novak’s is not a cheap shot, but it’s not as priceless as it appears. We have a most elaborate and curious system of rewards in this nation.

Imagine a critic of the industrial ethos, for instance. Do not imagine him, however, arising, breakfasting, and entering his study to set about his critical tasks (unless he’s graced with an annuity; perhaps a generous uncle made a killing in carburetors). No. He does that on weekends, as some attend to shrubbery. On weekdays he is, perhaps, a lawyer. His Saturday-Sunday critical exercises may be a way of keeping his mind sharp, or a way of avoiding narrow mental specialization. Or there may be a more “tangible” reward—a certain public notice, which may bring him to mind when readers of the journals-of-opinion have a law suit pending. Or perhaps he lectures, M-W-F, on Lovelace, Locke, medieval guilds, or nouns of agency. His weekend work may earn him a notch or two on his academic *vita*, maybe even a recommendation for promotion from some dean who couldn’t care less about the content but knows he’s published and therefore should not perish. But let’s not imagine his weekend stuff as a “job”; his job is what supports it. He may even feel that this system of indirect rewards is as curiously alienating as the fact that he types on a

product of the system while stimulated by the contents of an electric percolator for which his honorarium might even pay.

I'm not crying for this fellow. He's better off in a way than that amateur gardener, since his avocation may pay off, however indirectly; few people hire a lawyer because of a pretty yard. He might even be lectured by denizens of the "real" world: if your avocation is not a reward enough in itself. . . . I merely note him (or confess him?) as but a culturally more visible example of the human foundation of industrialism: the person for whom *doing* and *being* are separate, with little hope of their unity.

I realize that throughout I have given a rather external meaning to "what" a person "is." I do not mean to ignore the private depths and secret places, but the most inner energies assume certain forms in external commerce: that's generally the only way we can see them. And I know that few people in history, preindustrial history included, have been able to express those energies, totally, in public action—perhaps a few saints and a lot of murderers, although only the latter has ever been a recognized profession. There's a difference, however. Our society, without even a *professed* standard or moral unity between *life* and *livelihood*, is built on the assumption of the irrelevance of those energies. Or, if that's too strong, on their being bracketed off and their expression called "leisure activities." Which amounts to the same thing.

I don't think this can be greatly altered whether our industrial society is nationalized or whether the rhetoric of free enterprise is retained. Elaborate and even unsuperficial schemes and examinations for job aptitude are conscionable but not ultimately helpful; for it's the nature of our system with its increasing specialization and rationalizing of labor that it does not need *us*, only the skills we *can* perform. A discrepancy between the intimate self and the workful ways of expressing that self is here, I'm afraid, to stay.

If industrial society cannot generate traditions, but can only mangle them in its impatient necessity to find quicker and better ways of getting things done, or can only foster fashions that compete to take their places, which I think is the case, then those who do not wish to or cannot be satisfied with the frivolous, will have to cling, consciously, to the older traditions even if they don't fit the facts, including the traditional, Platonic, Judaeo-Christian, and Agrarian—Tate's "imperative of reference" that one *do* what he *is*, and thereby accept alienation as a part of being human.